

Chaplain's Prayer

The Senate has both secular and sacred rituals. Without question, the leader of sacred ritualistic activity is the Senate chaplain. Throughout the Senate's history, the existence of a chaplain as an officer of the Senate in a secular republic has stirred undercurrents of criticism. Yet, numerous court challenges, based on constitutional restrictions against the establishment of religion, have failed to dislodge this venerable Senate institution.

In its earliest decades, the Senate selected clergymen from mainline Protestant denominations—usually Episcopalians or Presbyterians—to deliver opening prayers and to preside at funerals and memorial services held for recently deceased members. These chaplains usually served for less than a year and conducted their Senate duties as an adjunct to their responsibilities as full-time leaders of nearby parishes. Over the most recent half-century, the Senate has continued to draw its chaplains from the leading Protestant denominations, but the post has become a full-time assignment, whose occupants tend to serve for a decade or more. Sensitive to the increasing religious diversity of the nation, the Senate occasionally invites representatives of other faiths to serve as guest chaplains.

The chaplain, more than any other official, reenforces the notion of the Senate—its members and staff—as an extended “family.” When a Senate “family member” suffers the death of a loved one, or rejoices in the birth of a child, the chaplain adds an appropriate reference in his daily prayer. He—no woman has yet served among the sixty-one official chaplains since 1789—also provides full-time pastoral care to members of this extended family.

The chaplain can also be expected to add a reference to the legislative situation during times of frustration and end-of-session turmoil. In 1984, as the session dragged on well beyond the scheduled adjournment date, the chaplain prayed “Father in heaven, we are here under duress, but we have imposed this upon ourselves.”¹ During the 1999 impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton, the chaplain crafted his opening prayers with particular care.²

1. Reverend Richard C. Halverson, *Congressional Record*, October [], 1984, p. ___ .

2. At the end of each two-year session of Congress, the Senate provides for the compilation and publication of the chaplain's prayers as a Senate document. Following the five-week impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton in 1999, the secretary of the Senate arranged for a commemorative limited-distribution publication of the chaplain's prayers.